A Disciple of Prince Florizel.

BY HARRISON G. RHOADES

"Charles Edward took a step forward and broke his word of honor."

Those who are familiar with Robert Louis Stevenson's "New Arabian Nights" will remember that the adventures of Prince Florizel of Bohemia took place, not in the capital city of his own land, but in the great town of London. Since this accomplished creature of Stevenson's imagination, who "gained the affection of all classes by the seduction of his manners and by a well-considered generosity," was not far from being the ideal of Mr. Charles Edward Austin, it is not strange that the metropolis of Britain has always seemed to the young American a richer and more promising field for whimsical adventure than New York.

This story begins with a conversation upon the possibilities of finding romance in modern life. It took place in a box at a London theatre in which young Mr. Austin and a friend found themselves one June evening. The period is that which Charles Edward is pleased to term his unregenerate days, meaning by this the time before he was married.

By the time the curtain had fallen on the second act of the adventures of a hero in doublet and hose, Mr. Austin had decided that it was a very dull play he was seeing.

"This," said Charles Edward, "is not romance."

"Perhaps not," replied Paul Cary, "still it's got something of the feeling. It's better than if the hero wore a frock coat, don't you think?"

"Rubbish!" said his friend decisively. "Evening dress and an opera hat are the costume of adventure, and London in this year of grace is far more romantic, to my mind, than Paris in the middle ages."

"I don't think I see it that way. What, for example, Charles Edward, would be your idea of an adventure for tonight? If this were medieval times we might have our swords out three or four times on the way home. A lovely lady might signal to us from a lofty balcony—"

"Oh, all the corresponding things could happen tonight. You remember the Stevenson story where a young man comes out of a London theatre. Near the entrance stands a neat little brougham with a coachman in sober blue livery. As the young man passes by a small hand gloved in white makes the quietest gesture of beckoning to him, while he catches a glimpse of a lady in a white cloak with a cloud of lace enveloping her head and partially concealing her face. Unhesitatingly the young man advances to the brougham, opens the door, and springs in. There, Paul—there's adventure for you."

"Ah, well, if that's all! It seems to me the sort of things not unheard of, though perhaps sufficiently vulgar as adventure. I dare say—"

"Pardon me, I don't mean that. If you notice the brougham you will see a crest upon it, perhaps even a coronet."

"Romance, then, I take it, consists in having a duchess fall in love with you at first sight."

"She might not be a duchess, and she might not fall in love. Of course, such a combination is the wildest dream. But I don't feel that one could count on either ducal rank or tender sentiment. She might be merely a lovely lady in distress, in desperate need of a gentleman to do something in her service. There's adventure. Talk of your romance in doublet and hose—I snap my fingers at it."

"Come out into the lobby and smoke instead," suggested Paul.

There was one more entr'acte, the usual entr'acte; two more acts of the play, the usual acts, and the audience to look at, the usual audience. The stalls presented the ordinary show of elaborately dressed heads, bare shoulders and white shirt fronts. The boxes contained no one of especial charm. Next the one which contained Charles Edward and his friend sat a lady alone, but so far in the shadow of the curtains that she could scarcely be called an object of interest. Bored by the play and uninterested in the audience, the Prince Florizel welcomed the final fall of the curtain and the prospect of the cool night air outside.

They sauntered forth upon the pavement, and then the unexpected happened. Near the entrance stood a neat little brougham with a coachman in sober blue livery. As Charles Edward passed by a small hand gloved in white made the quietest gesture of beckoning to him, while he caught a glimpse of a lady in a white cloak with a cloud of lace enveloping her head and partially concealing her face. He advanced unhesitatingly to the carriage, opened the door and sprang in. The coachman drove off swiftly in the direction of Trafalgar square, and Paul Cary, as one in a dream, pursued his solitary course toward his hotel. Upon the door of the carriage he had noted a crest; he was not sure that it was not a coronet.

II.

The faintest perfume of violets filled the brougham. The lady was sitting as far in the corner as she could retreat; the lace still partially concealing her face, but Charles forward in the gloom divined it had charm.

"I have told the coachman to drive to the Savoy. I want you to take me to supper. Is that the right place?"

"It is a good place, unless perhaps you prefer the Carlton."

"Oh, I don't know. I never go to supper. I suppose you think me mad."

"Supper is an essential meal," said Charles Edward gravely. "I am sure you are right in beginning to have it, and I am enormously flattered that you inaugurated so charming a custom in my company."

He took her hand, the hand that had beckoned to him—she gave a little gasp.

"Oh, don't—please don't," she pleaded.

"Ah, chere comtesse,'" protested her companion.

Charles Edward had let go her hand and the lady regained something of her composure.

"Why do you call me that?"

"I won't, if you prefer to be "incognita' even to me. And I apologize, if you are a duchess."

"You really don't know me."

"Dear lady, I haven't seen you yet, the inside of a carriage is absurdly dark."

"I was in the box next yours tonight," explained the stranger. "I overheard your conversation."

"Ah," said Charles Edward, "then do you love adventures, too?"

"I don't know," was the reply; "I never had one."

"Then you are a lovely lady in distress."

"I don't know," came plaintively. "I'm certainly in great trouble."

"And I know you're lovely."

"Please don't try to flirt with me."

Not to flirt at such a moment was a course which had little beside eccentricity and unexpectedness to recommend it. But these were both qualities in which Charles Edward dealt extensively, and so he endeavored to obey his companion's orders in a cheerful spirit.

The brougham already stood in the line of carriages waiting to discharge their occupants at the brightly illuminated entrance of the restaurant, and Charles Edward was now enabled to see his companion more plainly. That she was a lady he had not doubted from the beginning, but he had scarcely been prepared for the almost excessive refinement of her delicately-cut features, for the high-bred poise of her head and for the troubled look in her dark blue eyes.

Charles Edward withdrew his gaze. "Well, here we are," he said. She peered out at the entrance and the staircase, up which was passing the gay freight of the preceding carriages. A kind of nervous tremor passed over her and she clasped her hands more tightly together as they lay in her lap.

"Oh, I don't think I can face it. I don't think I can," she said, almost hysterically.

"Perhaps you are right, this place may be a little out of fashion. Shall we go to the Carlton?"

The lady nodded, and Charles Edward, putting his head out of the window, offered to the splendidly goldbraided functionary who stood ready to open the carriage door the most terrible insult of that individual's experience by asking him to direct the coachman to drive to a rival establishment. The brougham drove swiftly away and the lady gasped.

"Thank you, thank you. Let me think."

If she thought, in the brief period of silence that followed, so did her companion. It was one of the rules of the game of fantastic adventure, as he understood it, never to be agitated, however amazing a turn events might take. And agitated he was not. But that he was not ravaged by curiosity could not have been said with truth. He was unable to see what distress other than hunger could be alleviated by supping with hundreds of others at either the Savoy or the Carlton.

The brougham turned into Northumberland avenue, and the lady broke the silence.

"I have perhaps taken an unfair advantage of you."

"Not as yet," replied Charles Edward lightly, "though I'm at your mercy."

"We are," was the lady's solemn statement, "probably followed by detectives."

"Ah, are we?" exclaimed her companion, feeling as he spoke that his tone betrayed too plainly the boyish delight which he could not stifle.

"I hope so, at least. I ought to tell you that this may cause you great trouble and annoyance. I have no right to ask it of you. I acted foolishly—on the impulse of the moment. If you will stop the carriage now and get out I believe you will run no risks. And I thank you a thousand times for the spirit in which you have met me."

"You'll let me ask one question," his voice sounded serious—"You did say—did you not?—that you were in great distress, and that I could help you?"

"Yes. But it's a desperate way for me, and it may be an unpleasant one for you."

This sounded, in an almost literal sense, like adventure with a vengeance. At this moment the carriage drew up at the Carlton.

"I really must have supper, you know," said he.

The lady acknowledged the reappearance of the note of whimsical comedy by a faint smile, but she was still serious.

"Thank you," she said. "You shall understand more before you commit yourself to anything beyond supper."

III.

It is probable that not often in that great white room, which flashes pink toward midnight with the shaded lights of its supper tables, has a young man spent a more pleasant hour than did Charles Edward was his fair "incognita." Her vivacity, though he suspected it to be unusual with her and the result of the excessive nervous strain which she was undergoing, was nevertheless charming.

"I ought to point out celebrities to you. It's the usual thing at supper," he said. "But there are two objections. One is that there probably aren't many here, and the other is that, as I'm a stranger, I probably shouldn't know them if there were.

Charles Edward gazed about the room. Suddenly, as sometimes happened in a crowded place, a long vista opened for an instant and he caught a glimpse of a red-haired young woman at the opposite end of the restaurant.

"And, yes, there's Nancy Scott, the American actress, who has made such a hit at the Quadrant theatre."

His companion held her head a little higher and turned paler than before.

"I should imagine the creature comes here or to the Savoy for supper every night."

"Creature!" said Charles Edward. "Why, I know Miss Scott, and if ever there was—"

"Doubtless," interrupted the lady, "you will see my husband sitting next to her."

Charles Edward leaped to his feet and gazed in the direction of Miss Scott.

"The man with the small blonde mustache? But I know him. I met him at tea at Miss Scott's only the other day. Then you are Lady Holbrooke." He resumed his seat.

"I am a very unhappy woman."

"You had better tell me something about it, hadn't you?" said Charles Edward gently. "I will try to understand."

"I have embarked on such a career of madness tonight that I may as well give you my confidence," said the lady. And she told her story.

Lady Holbrooke, a Puritan by nature and a lover of all the refinements and delicacies of good form, had married a man whom one would like to call a Bohemian if the word had not of late years been cheapened beyond all hope of salvation. The marriage had been a love match, and this fact had at first kept in the background all their differences of haste and disposition. Lady Holbrooke's love of rural peace and calm, and her distaste for London and its whirl of worldly gayeties had been intensified by the coming of a child. Lord Holbrooke, on the contrary, had for London something of the feeling which the boulevardier has for the asphalt of Paris, and when country life had produced upon his health its due tonic and invigorating effects he longed to feel the pavement of Piccadilly once more beneath his feet, and to mix in the amazing and miscellaneous society which was his acquaintance. At first Lady Holbrooke had occasionally accompanied her husband to town, but she had found it beyond her powers to make even a pretense of enjoying herself.

She could never go with her husband more than a third of the way into his various "Bohemian" sets. At this point Charles Edward's knowledge of the world was not of the completest, yet he felt that the society into which Lord Holbrooke wished to lead his wife was only mildly unconventional and was always respectable. This was the more evident to him when it appeared that all the differences of opinion in the family had at last crystallized into the question of what their relations should be with Miss Nancy Scott.

Lady Holbrooke did not know Miss Scott and refused to. Her husband had made Nancy's acquaintance at a time when his wife had declined to leave Brookstede. The child had died young, and its mother had clung despairingly to the lonely life she had chosen to lead. Charles Edward divined the attempts which her husband had made to distract the current of her thoughts, and curiously enough he divined also that Lord Holbrooke had admired and deeply loved his wife. But he also guessed how the continual strain of a quiet life at Brookstede was more than the companionship loving earl could bear.

As to the definite question of Miss Nancy Scott, Lady Holbrooke was more precise. Even to the quiet of Brookstede had female friends of hers managed to carry the tale of Miss Scott's brilliant career and of the constant presence of Lord Holbrooke in her train.

"I cannot allow you to make yourself absolutely notorious in London with an actress," would be the lady's suggestion put concisely.

"If you mean that I'm in love with her, it's not so."

"Humph! I know what actresses are."

"You would like her enormously. Above all things, I wish that you and she might be friends. She is the one person you could thoroughly reconcile you to what you call my 'low Bohemian life in London.'"

The discussion at Brookstede rose to a pitch when Lady Holbrooke began to talk rather wildly about divorce.

"It is out of the question," protested her husband. "You can't charge me with cruelty, and you can't charge me with any other offense."

The "impasse" thus presented to her view gave the final twist to Lady Holbrooke's quivering nerves. This was the morning of the very day when this narrative began. She could not divorce her husband. He laughingly assured her that he would not divorce her and that he could not if he would. His laughter jangled in her ears, and, white-hot with rage, to her own astonishment, almost as much as to his, she found herself telling her husband that he should have evidence which would force him to divorce her within twenty-four hours.

"Laws are foolishly arranged," she said to Charles Edward as the coffee came, "but one finds a way through them sometimes. I went to the play tonight without a ghost of an idea. Now I want you to drive me to your rooms. Possibly you could let me have a little more of your time. And then perhaps we could talk for a half hour. That's all. I think you understand, and you are a gentleman."

"Yes, I think so," said her companion gently, "and I understand. But—" and he hesitated, "how are you to make sure that Lord Holbrooke is to know where you've gone??"

"I thought it all out," she answered, "and I sent word to a detective agency this morning that I was to be watched tonight."

"You sent word?"

"Well, of course, I signed my husband's name."

The situation was not lacking in piquancy, Charles Edward felt. But he also felt that it was not the part of a hero of fantastic adventure to act in any comedy without himself rearranging it somewhat and playing there in the role of a minor providence. Lady Holbrooke's confidences had put him in possession of half the materials for his plot. The singular chance that he knew Miss Nancy Scott gave him the other half, for he felt that it helped him to understand better than most people could the rights and wrongs of the Holbrooke quarrel.

Charles Edward felt himself a competent judge of what her feelings for Lord Holbrooke were. He had seen them together once, and he had recognized in Nancy the signs of friendliness of the most unmixed type. At least Lady Holbrooke's story, it may be taken, had not in any way affected his liking for Miss Scott, because, while his companion secured her coat from the cloak room, he sent a hurriedly penciled note to the American actress, whose party still lingered at their table, so far to one end of the room that they had apparently not observed the hero of this tale nor his guest.

IV.

Lady Holbrooke's story had to a certain extent quenched the gayety with which the supper began. Perhaps now that adventure was becoming more adventurous the lady's courage faltered. Or perhaps it was that silence on the part of the gentleman was only the calm which, as is well known to his friends, is apt to precede a peculiarly pyrotechnic outburst of "Charles-Edwardism."

The hansom stopped two-thirds of the way up the slope with which Piccadilly leads you to Hyde Park corner.

"This is where I have the honor to invite you," said Charles Edward. "And now I mean to have the half hour's talk—that is if there is time," he added half to himself and looking at his watch.

"Remember," he continued, "that I have promised to behave. You can bind me hand and foot if you like, but I won't be gagged. What I have to say you must listen to."

"I owe you that," said the lady.

"I don't know whether or not you believe in—well, I won't frighten you—in strong liking at first sight. The purest chance or fate, perhaps, brought us together. But it brought us together that I might—yes, I will say it—that I might love you."

Lady Holbrooke grew rigid in her chair and her eyes blazed out of a face paler than before.

"Oh, bind me if you like," said Charles Edward, with a smile and a deprecating movement of his hands; "only listen to me. If you have the courage for this adventure tonight, have you not enough courage for more than this? Do you know what the Italian lakes are like in June? Let's go there tomorrow."

"You have not understood. I am sorry. Will you kindly let me go?" Lady Holbrooke rose to her feet.

"No," said Charles Edward, without moving from where he stood. "Not yet. The suggestion frightens you. You are afraid of the world's judgment. You hesitate to become an outcast from society."

It was not the usual way in which a lover describes to the object of his affections the results of yielding to a grand passion, yet the young man continued:

"In the eyes of the world, what I propose is no worse than this."

"Oh, yes, yes," said Lady Holbrooke, yet not wholly in a tone of conviction.

"Certainly. Come here, where you can look out of the window. You see that man leaning against the park railings. There's your detective. What story will he tell? Of course, I shall swear that I have known you for a long time, but they can disprove that. You will be shown to have met a perfectly strange young man at the theatre and gone to his rooms. What I propose, a deep love, a great passion, would almost justify you in the eyes of the world. You hesitate to take it, yet you involve yourself in what can only seem intrigue of the most squalid and vulgar sort."

"This is infamous; it is unworthy. How can you put it to me this way now—now—"

"Now that it is too late, do you mean?"

"Yes," said the lady, sinking into a chair.

"You understand why. Because I think you could come to love me."

Lady Holbrooke shrugged her shoulders.

"Why not?" continued Charles Edward. "You don't love your husband."

The poor lady rested her head wearily on the high stuffed side of her chair. A tear or two started slowly down her cheek, and in a confused way she searched for a handkerchief. For a moment the young man hesitated, as though it was cruel to go on, and then, as if he must go through with it, continued:

"You don't love him. You can't ever have cared much for him, when you seized on such a pretext as Nancy Scott for a separation. I know her. I give you my word of honor she is a lady, every inch of her, and as straight as a string. There couldn't ever have been anything between her and your husband. But thank Heaven you thought so, for otherwise I should have no hope."

Lady Holbrooke was quietly weeping now. Charles Edward took a step forward and broke his word of honor. He touched her arm.

"Could you not care for me a little?" he asked.

She sprang to her feet and shook him off.

"Certainly not," she said fiercely, "there's only one man in the world I love."

"And that's your husband," said Charles Edward. "You had better go back to him."

"How can I now?" she cried, her fierceness again all gone. "How can I?"

Charles Edward said nothing. Lady Holbrooke was weeping again with her head plunged into the cushions of a sofa. For a minute or two there was no sound except the occasional clatter of a cab horse going by in Piccadilly. Then one came along which stopped, apparently just in front of the house, and in a moment the door bell sounded, pulled by a vigorous hand. Lady Holbrooke started up.

"What is that?" she asked.

"That," said Charles Edward, "is Miss Nancy Scott and Lord Holbrooke. I sent her a note asking her to bring him on here. I thought that perhaps after our half hour's talk you would like to see him. You can easily explain how you and I thought it would be fun to give him this surprise. And, of course, you've known me for a long time."

"Then you—you," began the lady, smiling through the tears she was hastening to wipe away.

"I what?" asked Charles Edward, with almost a chuckle.

"You don't mean—"

"No, I don't mean any of it. Except that, of course, I do think you're a dear."

"That's what you are," exclaimed Lady Holbrooke, and darting forward with a sudden impulsive movement she kissed Charles Edward on the cheek, to that youth's utter amazement and indeed before he realized very clearly what had happened.

"There!" she said, "now I am compromised. But you needn't say anything about it."

The voices of Lord Holbrooke and Miss Scott were now heard as they started to mount the second flight.

"Remember," said Charles Edward, "that I extremely want to talk to Miss Scott upon the balcony, and that I should like to be chaperoned from this room."

"We won't disturb you," promised the lady, radiant now, "and you mustn't disturb us. I shall have so much to say to Geoffrey."

What Lady Holbrooke thought of her young American friend might have been gathered most easily ten days after the events above described, when she and Miss Scott, with some others, made up a week-end party at Brookstede. The hostess thought she had reason to suppose that Charles Edward had proposed, and in vain, to the adorable Nancy. She undertook to plead his cause with the young woman.

"Yes," answered Miss Scott, "all you say of him and more, is true. I like him awfully. But I'm not a marrying woman. Not even a falling-in-love woman, I'm afraid. Besides," she continued, in a vein of banter which Lady Holbrooke was beginning to find comprehensible, "if I were susceptible I should be in love with Lord Holbrooke."

"Oh, there is no one like Geoffrey," said that gentleman's wife, beaming, "but Mr. Austin is wonderful."

"He's more than that," said Nancy, with the air of summing up the matter, "he is Charles Edward."

(Copyright.)